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THE BOOK OF THE MONTH

ADAM, EVE, AND THE COSMOS ¹

BY LAWRENCE GILMAN

"MOST exquisite, most adorable, copper-crowned lily, eyes soft as water and hard as steel, mouth that Cupid might steal with which to make a bow, most exquisite, most adorable . . . I place in each of your palms a kiss so heavy that you shall carry the stigmata of Eros . . ." Do managers of munition factories make love like that? To be sure, this was no ordinary munition-maker. Cottenham, owner and manager of the Cottenham Works, had brilliant blue eyes, close-cropped curly brown hair that exhaled masculinity and taste for good living, and in moments of balked desire he rushed to the piano and sought to massage his complex by playing Debussy, having found Bach too much like a Cambridge don to suit his need. It is surprising to learn that he finally took refuge in a piano piece of Maurice Ravel's called *Gallows*. We know that piece. It is no piece for an erotic munition-maker, with its tonal evocations of cold winds sporting with dead men's locks, and staring eyes that the crows have pecked. But no doubt there was a lurking Freudian nigger in Cottenham's psychic wood-pile who could not have been placated by so obviously appropriate a piece as the Prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*—besides, Wagner does not come out well on the piano. and Cottenham, being a munition-maker of fine aesthetic responsiveness, knew enough not to put musical cordite into an ivory container.

A strange fellow, this amorous munitionist! But very deadly—a masculine "vamp." His erotic history had begun when he was fifteen, and now, within marching dis-

¹ *Blind Alley*, by W. L. George. Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1919.

tance of middle age, we find him still exerting the lethal charm of his close-cropped curls upon the undisciplined hearts of the girl workers in his plant. Monica, who did her bit as an upper-class Englishwoman by staining her hands with TNT in Cottenham's factory, yielded with amazing precipitateness when she met her boss strolling in the byways wearing a brown suit and smoking a pipe. Then it was that M. Bergson's justly celebrated Life Force awoke in Monica's breast and began to clamor for exercise.

We must confess that our heart sank when we learned that Monica was "passionately unawakened." We have known these unawakened ladies in the febrile pages of Mrs. Glyn—they walk in their sleep, and one must keep an eye on them, and a restraining hand on their fugacious nighties. True to type, Monica lost no time. Though unawakened, she not only walked in her sleep—she ran. This was made easy, first, by the fact that she was (as the fanciful Cottenham justly viewed her) a wood-nymph, tall and very slim, and enjoying, in the words of his poetizing imagination, a scamper through the thickets of birch, where a watcher might have glimpsed the flashing of a white flank among the shadowy tree trunks. She lost, we have said, no time: for though, on page 161 of Mr. George's veracious chronicle of contemporary England, she is still unawakened, it is only three pages further on that we find her "overwhelmed by a feeling of sweetest sin" and telling herself that she is "not moral."

She spoke quite sternly to herself: "Look here, my dear girl, do try and realize he's married to a woman who's much better looking than you. . . . He adores his children. That settles marriage, quite apart from the fact that he hasn't suggested it, but anyhow—it's unthinkable." She was facing something, she realized, "that was not done"—no indeed—but between which and herself stood only a traditional code without precise moral penalties. But what can you do with a blue-eyed munition-maker whose hair curls crisply and who makes love like an Old Testament amorist? Unawakened on page 161, it is disconcerting to be told on page 168 that "You are tall and slim like an ear of wheat in the moonlight." On page 171 it becomes crystal-clear that this rhapsodic munition-maker with the crisp curls Means No Good to Our Nellie. For at that point he takes her hand,—a hand that trembles,—turns

it palm upward, and presses into its hollow the "heavy kiss" described in our opening paragraph.

Thereafter, "as easily as one thing leads to another" (in Mr. Kipling's phrase) we find him sending her an envelope containing a Key and a note that reads as follows:

This key will let you into Bull's Field as they call it, into the Garden of Eden if you like.

This delicate symbolism turns the trick, and in a deserted shanty, in a field shut away from the world by high palings and carpeted by shy blue speedwell and stitchwort, Monica and the munition-maker pass a pleasant evening—marred for the fastidious student of erotic processes, in the recounting, only by the fact that Cottenham's crisp locks were "rebellious" as Monica stroked them. We had thought that Mr. Robert W. Chambers held the international copyright on *Rebellious Hair*.

But it is, we are happy to say, nothing more consequential than this copyright that is violated. Mr. Chambers' other celebrated copyrights are left un infringed. The most important of them all—the copyright on the *Deciduous Kimona*—is untouched. For Cottenham, after carefully examining the historic Apple and savoring its fragrance, decides to preserve it instead of eating it. In other words, by a graceful transit from the third to the thirty-ninth chapter of *Genesis*, this heedful Adam and his Eve are metamorphosed before our eyes into Joseph and the spouse of Potiphar.

And meanwhile, the war goes on. Cottenham "crushed her to him" (Mr. George's erotic vocabulary, as we have uneasily indicated, is strangely Chamberian) while the gallant Roumanians retreated before Mackensen; he makes love to Monica over the telephone in the same breath with which he tells her that the *Somme* offensive has begun. Venus cuddles in the lap of Mars.

* * * * *

Mr. George in this novel has grappled very energetically with his heart-breaking task—an attempt to transfix the England of 1916-1919. It is a brave attempt; but the canvas, for all its desperate contemporaneity, is curiously lifeless. There is no royal road to imaginative re-creation. Certainly Mr. George has not achieved actuality by the simple process of

sprinkling his pages with the names of Lloyd George, Trotzky and Lenine, the British Labor Party, Wilson, Carson, Raemakers, Clemenceau, Ian Hay, Kitchener, Gompers, and turning the reflections of his protagonists into admirably written leaders from the *Manchester Guardian*. The process by which Sir Hugh slides from the *Spectator* and the upper-class traditions of English country life, to the London *Nation* and radical speculations, has not been made credible merely by identifying Sir Hugh's meditations with the progressive pamphleteering of the war. The imaginative capture of an epoch involves a subtler and more difficult process than that.

Mr. George has not pulled off an artistic success. Monica and her abstemious lover; the woodland adulteries of Sylvia and other ladies; Cradoc the "C. O.;" the ferocities of Lady Oakley,—these are like the typical personifications of a cartoonist; if it were not for their labels, their significance would be lost. And it is amazing that so shrewd an observer, so excellent a realist as Mr. George (the George of *A Bed of Roses* and *The Second Blooming*) should be willing to stand for the absurdities of such mannikins as Cottenham and Monica. If Mr. George had been less anxious to put over his "cosmic attempt" (as he calls it) "to show a world society in the midst of a world movement," and had looked a bit more steadily and curiously into the hearts of his creatures, he would have written a better book. It is so easy *not* to be cosmic.

LAWRENCE GILMAN.